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HANDICAPPING LANGUAGE:

A Guide for
Journalists and the Public

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*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet."*

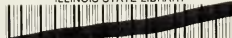


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hen Shakespeare penned those immortal words for “Romeo and Juliet,” he didn’t have people with disabilities in mind. Words like “handicapped,” “wheelchair-bound” and “polio victim” may sound neutral or sympathetic, but people with disabilities find them patronizing and offensive. The language people and news organizations use can reinforce negative stereotypes and misconceptions. Or, they can help change attitudes toward people with disabilities by describing them and their conditions accurately.

Inside are six general rules for writing or talking about people with disabilities, followed by tips on interacting and a short glossary of outdated terms and suggested alternatives. Many of the new terms are slightly longer, but using them will help avoid being perceived as insensitive or “behind the times.”

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PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: Handicapped has a negative connotation for many people, so most social service agencies and news organizations now use "person with a disability." Handicap describes a condition or barrier caused by society or the environment, i.e., "She is handicapped by inaccessible transportation," or "stairs are a handicap to him."

PERSON FIRST: The person precedes the disability, both figuratively and literally. It's "people with disabilities," not "disabled persons," and "person with cerebral palsy," not "cerebral palsy victim."

AVOID PITY: People with disabilities aren't "victims." As one woman who uses a wheelchair noted, "I'm not a wheelchair victim. Wheelchair victims are the people I bump into with my footrest at the supermarket." Nor should people be described as "inspirational" or "courageous" just because they have a disability.

ADJECTIVES AREN'T NOUNS: Use an adjective as a description, not a category or group, i.e., "people who are disabled," not "the disabled," and "person with epilepsy," not "an epileptic."

AVOID BEING CUTE: Terms like "physically challenged," "special," and "differently-abled" are patronizing. If appropriate, note that a person has a physical, sensory, or mental impairment and leave it at that. Also, people without disabilities aren't "normal," because that infers that people with disabilities are abnormal. Rather, they are "non-disabled" or "able-bodied."

GERMANENESS: People with disabilities should be treated just like everyone else. You wouldn't mention the physical condition of a non-disabled person unless it was germane to the conversation or story, so unless a person's disability is relevant, leave it out.

INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

When introduced to a person with a disability, it is polite to shake hands. Most people with limited use of their hands, or artificial limbs, can shake hands. If you're not sure, let the other person make the first move.

Adults should be treated as adults. The presence of a physical impairment does not necessarily mean someone has a mental impairment as well. So treat people with disabilities with the same respect you treat others; speak directly to them instead of to a companion or interpreter who may be along and leave the baby talk for babies.

Common expressions such as "see you later" or "I've got to run along" are not insulting to those who can't, so don't feel uncomfortable if they creep into your conversation. Don't be embarrassed to offer to help someone with a disability, but wait until the offer is accepted and instructions are given before proceeding.

SPEECH IMPAIRMENTS

Ask questions that can be answered in few words or with a nod of the head. Don't pretend to understand when you don't. Repeat what you think the person said, and if all else fails use written notes.

DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

To get the person's attention, touch the person lightly, wave your hand or use some other physical sign. If an interpreter is being used, speak to the person being interviewed rather than to the interpreter.

If the person is lip-reading, look directly at the person, speak slowly and clearly, but do not exaggerate your lip movements and especially don't shout. Speak expressively because the person will use your facial expressions, gestures and body movements to help understand.

Don't stand with a bright light behind you and keep your hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking. If you are still having trouble communicating, feel free to use written notes. Even the best lip reader can pick up less than half the words you speak.



VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

When meeting someone with a severe visual impairment, identify yourself and introduce anyone else who is present. Before trying to shake hands, say something like "Shall we shake hands?" or reach for the other person's extended hand. When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair.

If walking from one location to another, offer your arm as a guide and alert the person to any obstacles such as steps, curbs or low arches. If dining, don't feel embarrassed to orientate the person as to the location of silverware or other items. Let the person know when you are leaving.

PEOPLE IN WHEELCHAIRS OR ON CRUTCHES

Consider a person's wheelchair part of the person. It's not polite to touch or lean on the chair unless the person gives permission. Never pat a person in a wheelchair on the head.

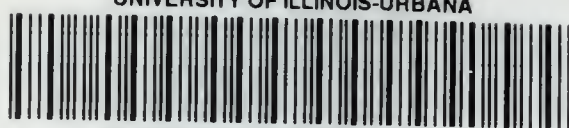
When talking to someone in a wheelchair or on crutches for more than a few minutes, sit or place yourself at the other person's eye level. Let people who use wheelchairs or crutches keep them within reach.

Make sure the room and site is accessible, i.e., that the person can reach the location, that parking, bathrooms and other facilities are accessible, and that there are elevators or ramps. If you think there may be a problem, let the person know in advance so other plans can be made.

COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

Talk in short, simple sentences and maintain eye contact. Ask open-ended rather than yes-no or either-or questions. When possible, use pictures to help explain what you mean.

Don't get frustrated if you are having a hard time communicating. Be patient and reassuring. Often it helps to have a friend of the person along to put the person at ease and interpret questions and responses.



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Below is a list of outdated expressions and recommended alternatives:

OBJECTIONABLE	PREFERRED
afflicted.....	has
birth defect.....	disabled since birth, born with
cerebral-palsied.....	has cerebral palsy
cripple, crip.....	walks with the aid of crutches
deaf mute	deaf
defective	impaired
deformed.....	has a physical disability
dummy	pre-lingually deaf
Elephant Man's disease	neurofibromatosis
emotionally disturbed.....	behavior disordered
epileptic.....	has epilepsy
former mental patient.....	mentally restored
handicapped	disabled, disability
handicapped accessible.....	accessible to people with disabilities, fully accessible
hearing impaired	deaf or hard of hearing
hunchbacked	has a spinal curvature
insane, deranged, deviant	has a mental impairment
lame	walks with a limp, uses crutches
midget, dwarf.....	short-statured or little person
Mongoloid idiot	Down syndrome
normal	non-disabled, able-bodied
paralytic, arthritic	is paralyzed, has arthritis
retarded	cognitive disability, developmentally disabled
spastic.....	has seizures, muscular dystrophy
wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair	uses a wheelchair

If you have questions about appropriate terminology or interviewing etiquette, call the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services' Division of Media and Public Affairs at 217/785-3893 (V/TTY).

Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services

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